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Smith, Joan oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Joan Smith by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Smith, Joan

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

December 9, 2002

Place

Camden, Maine

ID Number

MOH 382

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Biographical Note

Joan Smith (*pronounced* Jo-Ann) was born in Camden, Maine. Her family has lived in the Camden area since before the American Revolution. After Smith married her husband Owen, they moved to Washington, D.C. for eight years, until Owen's death. The Smiths lived in the Chevy Chase area of D.C. and lived right across the street from Harry McPherson. Joan eventually moved back to Maine to raise her seven children. She and her husband were active Democrats.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: personal and family background; moving to Washington D.C.; C. Owen Smith; Owen's involvement with Ed Muskie; meeting Owen; living near the McPhersons in Washington; Democrats in Maine; and Camden, Maine community and history.

Indexed Names

Bernstein, Leonard
Coffin, Frank Morey

Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963
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Smith, Margaret Chase, 1897-1995

Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Joan Smith at her home in Camden, Maine, on December the 9th, the year 2002. If you could start, would you just give me your full name including your maiden?

Joan Smith: Joan McConnelly Perry Smith.

AL: Is Perry with an E?

JS: Y, it's an old Rockland name.

AL: P-E-R-R-Y?

JS: Yes.

AL: And is that where you were born, in Rockland?

JS: No, I was born in Camden.

AL: And grew up here?

JS: Hm-hmm. The Perrys have been here since before the Revolution.

AL: Oh, really?

JS: Oh, yeah.

AL: So your grandparents and grandparents were all from -?

JS: Both sides of the family.

AL: What family stories were told about this area when you were growing up?

JS: I don't think any. My mother's parents came from North Penobscot where she said she never wanted to go again because it was the bleakest area in the whole country. But they had a big farm that was a King's grant of land in the 18th century. My grandfather came to Camden

and had a farm on High Street, which is now right in the middle of town, but it was a farm then with horses and cows and sheep. And he ran a patent medicine business, he made mustard plasters, and he did very well with it until the Food and Drug Act put him out of business. But actually, he's the reason we have this great big post office in Camden, because he did such a big mail order business, with the plasters.

AL: And so it really gave the postal service a reason to build a -

JS: Yeah, first class big post office.

AL: Oh, neat. Now, did you stay, have you lived in Camden all your life?

JS: No, I lived in Washington for eight years. Other than that. So far, as Bert and I say.

AL: Now was that when you and your husband went to Washington?

JS: Yeah, he worked for the Pentagon. He was assistant to the Secretary of the Army, who was at that time Stephen Ayles.

AL: And what year was this, or years?

JS: Sixty-one I think it was that we went there.

AL: Is when you moved? And then you came back eight years later?

JS: Yeah, when he died.

AL: And before going to Washington your husband was active here in Maine, wasn't he?

JS: Yes, he came, his family came from Bath, but he didn't, he wasn't born here. But he started the *Maine Coast Fisherman* newspaper, which is now *National Fisherman* and it merged all those great papers. But when he started it, it was just the *Maine Coast Fisherman*. It was a wonderful little paper that covered the whole coast of Maine and all the shipyards and all the fishing that was going on. And I worked for him, it was fun. Wrote letters to all the lighthouse keepers, and he traveled the whole state, the whole coast all the time because there were only three of us were putting it out.

AL: Now, what was his training, as a writer?

JS: No, he went to Harvard and majored in pre-med, and then I think he did finish majoring in English, but he was a writer. After that of course it was the war, and he went five years in the Pacific, and when he came back he got a job with the *Portland Press Herald*, he said, as a cub reporter with Tuesdays off. That's where he got started writing, and then he, through a friend, got some backing to start this paper. And his college roommate, Tony Butler, came up from Boston and ran the circulation end of it, and Owen ran the advertising. And so, that's how we got started in Maine.

AL: And let's say his full name for the record, I forgot.

JS: Converse Owen Smith. Nobody ever called him Converse.

AL: And how did he land the job in Washington, what made -?

JS: A friend of ours. Oh, it was 1960 I guess, and we had just had our fifth child, and we had started a little newspaper after he left the *Maine Coast Fisherman* called *Outdoor Maine*, which was a lot of fun but was an idea whose time was not quite ready and so it failed. And we needed to work, and so Steve Ayles said he could use him down in Washington and that's how we went.

AL: That was a pretty significant job.

JS: Yeah, well, it was, there's millions of assistants, you know, down there, that are appointed by whoever happens to be the secretary at present, and all get, leave when he goes. But he used to travel all over the country inspecting Army bases.

AL: And was your husband active in politics here in Maine, too?

JS: Yes, yes, he loved it.

AL: How, was he a Democrat or a Republican?

JS: Oh yes, he was a Democrat.

AL: There weren't many, though, in this area.

JS: No, no.

AL: How did that work?

JS: Didn't work too well in Knox County. They did well in the state, but Knox County didn't go (*unintelligible phrase*). He was funny telling about what happened while he was running, he was mostly just running, you know, his campaigning was in Knox County, which is small, and he knew he had all the fishermen women, they just loved him, and he had the paper. So on Election Day we were waiting for the returns and nothing came in from Vinalhaven and North Haven, nothing all day long, nothing at night. So he finally called John Chilles, you know John Chilles?

AL: No.

JS: He's still out there, and he was the chairman of the Democratic Party out there, he's a fisherman.

AL: How do you spell his last name?

JS: C-H-I-L-L-E-S. Anyway, he said, "Oh God, Owen, you don't mean it. It was a nice day and we all went fishing." They didn't vote.

AL: Oh, my. So did he, he didn't win?

JS: No, he didn't. There was an undertaker in Rockland who was running against him, he won.

AL: That's hard.

JS: It was hard.

AL: Did he ever, did your husband ever talk about, you said you were very busy with the kids, did he ever talk to you about his involvement maybe in Ed Muskie's campaign in the fifties?

JS: Oh, I guess he was involved.

AL: Or what he thought of Ed Muskie? There must have been -

JS: Oh, we all thought he was wonderful.

AL: Yeah? Did you have a chance to meet him?

JS: Yup, I met him once or twice. I knew Frank a little better.

AL: Frank Coffin?

JS: Yes, he was there at the house a few times during the election process. That was when he became, didn't he become governor that year?

AL: Muskie?

JS: Yeah, but I mean he became governor after Muskie, Frank did.

AL: Oh, he didn't become governor, but he became a congressman.

JS: Oh, I thought he did. Oh yeah, I thought he was governor for a while.

AL: No, but when you met them, like when you met Frank Coffin, what was it that you, what was it that stuck out that really made you say, hey, this guy's got something going on?

JS: Oh, it wasn't like that. It was, he was here for dinner and he was just so interesting to talk to, and he's so nice, gosh he was nice.

AL: And with Ed Muskie? What was -?

JS: I didn't know him really, I mean, I met him but I didn't, and he was always so nice, too. Owen knew him well, but I didn't. There was another guy in Rockland, I don't know if you can find out if he's still there. Of course, this was all a long time ago. It was Dominic Cutchenella. I know there's still some Cutchenellas in Rockland, and he was, I think he was head of the party in Rockland, and he would know a lot of things. He used to come, we had, you know, we had meetings, Owen did, and fund raisers and things like that. I gave a coffee for Owen and I invited all the Republicans, and they all came. And, because I thought, well the Democrats are going to vote for him anyway, so I'll get the Republicans here, because all my friends were Republicans, practically (*unintelligible word*), Don Shevis and Matt Flanagan, the Flanagans. (*Name*) was involved, you might want to talk to her. Now, I remember what one of them said, he said, "Owen, if you wanted to be in the state senate, why didn't you tell us?"

AL: Now, your husband, he graduated from Harvard in the same class as JFK?

JS: Thirty-nine, I think it was. JFK and Leonard Bernstein, and Owen, and some other important person.

AL: That's quite an elite class.

JS: Yeah, I guess it was.

AL: Did he have any recollections of those people?

JS: He didn't know them in college.

AL: No?

JS: No, that was a big place. And, you know, Kennedy, well of course Kennedy had money. I don't know about Bernstein, but Owen was working as a waiter and shoveling snow and coal and everything else to get through.

AL: So how did you meet him, your husband?

JS: Well, I met him at a New Year's Eve party. He was here during the war. He was here waiting for his ship that was being built down here, it was a mine sweeper, and you'd build them here. And I wasn't here, I was away at college, but he was here for, oh, probably most of the winter. I don't know what year, the beginning of the war, I mean probably forty-one [1941], something like that, waiting for his ship. And there was a little officer's club where they all stayed downtown, and he got to know some very good friends of my family while he was here, and so, and he saw a lot of them, they loved him. And when he came back after the war they said, "Well come and see us, we can help you get a job or something."

So he came back and that's how he, they helped him start the *Maine Coast Fisherman*. But anyway, it was after the war, it was 1947, '48, it was New Year's Eve, and he was there at a party, and that's when I met him. I don't know whether they were Democrats or Republicans, it never came up. It mostly didn't anyway with people around here, because most of them were

Republicans, so we just tended not to talk about politics very much except when we were with other Democrats. My family were Democrats, my mother was.

AL: Really?

JS: Yeah, and my grandfather Montgomery was. It was quite unusual at the time.

AL: Yeah. Did they ever talk about who, some of the presidents or political figures that they really admired?

JS: Well, I know they voted against Roosevelt, but they were Democrats. At least my mother voted against him, and I think my father did, too. But I thought he was wonderful, and that was when I was six.

AL: So you've enjoyed politics over the years?

JS: No, not really, but, see, he came, you know, there was publicity about him and you heard him talk and give those fireside chats and things, and I just thought he was great.

AL: Now, you lived near the McPhersons when you lived in Washington?

JS: They moved in near us.

AL: Oh, is that how it worked?

JS: Yeah, they lived on Capitol Hill in a tiny little house, and they were out to our house for dinner one night, and we lived in Chevy Chase which was a really nice place to live in Washington, with houses that had lawns and trees. It wasn't like being in the city, it was nice. So after dinner we all went out for a walk around the neighborhood and they fell in love with it, and bought a house across the street.

AL: What were they like?

JS: Oh, I don't know if I should, there's a lot of things about them, but Harry was great, they were great people, but unusual. Clay, his wife, was, they were of course Democrats, and she was an actress but she didn't act, except once or twice, but she was a very good one, and she was involved in arena stage and stuff like that in Washington. Harry worked non-stop, he worked for LBJ, and you worked twenty-four hours a day if you worked for him. He was, now what was he? I can't think of his title, but he wrote speeches.

AL: Yes, speech writer.

JS: Speech writer. And also legal counsel, because he was a lawyer, he is a lawyer. Do you know him?

AL: We've interviewed him for the project, so -

JS: You did?

AL: Don did, Don interviewed him, but I've listened to the interview, parts of it.

JS: He was a great guy. He's been up here quite a few times.

AL: I'm going to pause for just a sec. You've talked about a couple people that I might want to contact who are Democrats in this area. Is there anyone else you can think of, or is there anyone who may not be with us anymore but who was really active in, you know, say the forties, fifties, sixties?

JS: Well of course we were gone in the sixties, we were in Washington.

AL: Or seventies?

JS: I wasn't involved in the seventies at all because after I came back here I had seven children to raise by myself, I was kind of busy with that. They were teenagers, so that was what I was doing.

AL: But those early days in the forties and fifties, was there any -?

JS: In the forties I was in college, so that, you know, I don't know what was going on here except Margaret Chase Smith everybody knew about. And in the fifties, it really wasn't my dish of tea. I was just starting my job and I was, and then I got married and started having babies, and that was that. I heard an awful lot of talk but I couldn't, you know, tell you what at this point.

AL: Yeah, yeah, I was sort of just wondering if you had impressions of the Democrats who did live here, you know, just sort of a perception of how they felt living in a very strong Republican area.

JS: Oh, I don't think it bothered anybody, I mean, no, no more than it does now. I mean, we were really sorry Chellie [Pingree] didn't make it, but I figured she wasn't going to. She made it in Knox County, but.

AL: I think that's all the questions I have, unless there was something I didn't ask you that you think is important to add in terms of any stories, anecdotes, that you might have heard about Senator Muskie or your husband's involvement in politics?

JS: Oh, he had another funny voting story. My husband, before we were married, lived at Saturday Cove which is a tiny, tiny little village between here and, it's not even a village hardly, it's a cove between here and Belfast. But it did have a general store, and that's where they voted. And so he was getting results for the, he worked for the *Republican Journal* as well as *Maine Coast Fisherman*, so he was calling up to get the election results. And he called the guy that ran the store, and he said, "How many Republican votes were there?" And Harold said, "Well, there was twenty-five." Owen said, "Well, how many Democratic votes?" And he said, "Oh, do you

want us to count them?”

AL: That's not nice.

JS: It's true, though. It was funny. And I don't know, you just accept it as a fact of life that half your friends and colleagues are Republican, but not all. I don't know, it just didn't seem to make much difference in your social life.

AL: No, unless you wanted to run for office.

JS: Yes, right, but I didn't want to run for office. And we couldn't really afford it either, we had all those children and we didn't have any money, so.

AL: Well, great, thank you very much.

JS: Well, I don't think it was much help to you.

AL: That's okay, thank you.

End of Interview